Family Structure, Family Process, and Adolescent Well-Being

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Article:
This article examines the influence of family structure and family relation- ships on adolescent well-being. Using a subsample (N = 850) of data collected in the National Survey of Families and Households, we examine socioemotional adjustment, academic performance, and global well-being among adolescents (ages 12 to 18) living in the four most prevalent family structures in the United States: (a) intact first-married family units, (b) divorced, single- parent families, (c) stepfamilies, and (d) continuously single mothers and their children, one of the fastest growing types of households. These four family types vary dramatically on socioeconomic characteristics and rneasures of family relations. Compared to the other family types, families headed by continuously single mothers have the lowest income, whereas divorced families and stepfamilies report the highest levels of mother-adolescent disagreement and the lowest levels of parental supervision and mother-adolescent interaction, Unadjusted comparisons across family types reveal that adolescents in first-rnarried families have slightly higher scores on all three measures of well-being, but few of the differences are statistically significant, Regression analyses indicate that the strongest and most consistent predictor of adolescent well-being is mother-adolescent disagreement, Other family process variables directly involving the mother-adolescent dyad (mother-adolescent interaction, aggression, and support) are consistently related to adolescent adjustment, academic performance, and well-being.

The central objective of this study is to examine the influence of family structure and family relationships on adolescent well-being. Specifically, are adjustment problems and poor academic performance due to (a) single-parent family structure, divorce, or stepfamilies; or (b) other processes such as economic hardship and family conflict that exist across a variety of family forms? A substantial amount of research has examined the influence of different family structures on children's well-being. Most studies have focused on how children are affected by parental divorce (see reviews by Amato Sr Keith, 1991; Demo & Acock, 1988; Emery, 1988) and single parent families (Cashion, 1984; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). In the past decade there has been growing interest in children's adjustment in stepfamilies (Bray, 1988; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). Less common are comparative studies that examine family relationships and outcomes for children across intact families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies. Most studies also fail to examine relevant explanatory and control variables, such as the quality of family relationships, race, socioeconomic status, and children's age.

Our analyses are based on data collected in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). We examine the behavior of adolescents (ages 12 to 18) living in the four most prevalent family structures in the United States: (a) intact first-married family units, (b) divorced, single-par- ent families, (c) stepfamilies, and (d) continuously single-parent families, one of the fastest growing types of households.

SIGNIFICANCE AND BACKGROUND

Unprecedented numbers of children live in "nontraditional" families. More than one fourth of American children, and over half of Black youth, live in single-parent, predominantly female-headed households (U.S.

Bureau of the Census, 1992a). In 1992 the largest percentage (36.6%) of single-parent families were precipitated by divorce, but nearly as large a percentage (34.2%) were headed by never-married parents. There are also important racial variations, with never-married parents constituting the largest pro- portion (55.8%) of Black single parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992b). A related set of changes has restructured the dynamics of two-parent families, with many children living in stepfamilies without one of their biological parents.

How consequential is family structure in determining family relation- ships and children's well-being? Are children in single-parent families maladjusted in comparison to their counterparts in two-parent families? How important is family disruption, and in what specific ways does it affect children? Is the problem for children the loss of time with nonresidential parents, or living in an environment of persistent conflict, or economic deprivation that is often associated with divorce and single-parent family structure?

Past research has not been comparative in character. There are many studies comparing children in single-parent families to those in intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991) and fewer studies comparing children in stepfamilies to those in intact families (Ganong & Coleman, 1994), but rarely are all three groups compared. There is a general neglect of the fact that single-parent families are not monolithic and are not necessarily formed by a legal divorce among the parents. Single-parent families that form as the result of divorce are different in many ways from single-parent families in which the mother has never married. Further confounding our under- standing of family structure and its influence on children is the fact that very few studies examine the effects of marital instability and family conflict in two-parent families. This study overcomes these limitations by (a) pro- viding a thorough comparison of different family structures and (b) examining the influence of relevant mediating and control variables. Although research generally supports the notion that family structure influences children's well-being, the mechanisms through which this occurs are not well understood. We examine several important factors (e.g., parental support, interparental conflict, and parent—adolescent conflict) that may account for differences in adolescent well-being across family types, Because insufficient attention has been given to social class, racial, and gender differences in well-being, we control for these effects.

Conceptual Background

Research relating family structure to the well-being of youth can be summarized by three approaches: (a) family composition, (b) economic deprivation, and (c) family conflict.

Family composition. A common assumption in many social psycho- logical, developmental, sociological, and anthropological theories is that two biological parents provide the optimal environment for healthy child development. Two representative and highly influential views are the Freudian position that a two-parent group constitutes the essential unit for appropriate sex-typed identification and, in sociology, Parsons' structural-functional theory emphasizing the importance of role differentiation within nuclear families for healthy family functioning and child socialization (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Deviations from this family structure, it is argued, are problematic for children. For example, single-parent family structure is associated with lower levels of parent-child interaction, parental supervision, support, and control—family dynamics that have been shown to have deleterious consequences for adolescents (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987). Nock (1988) argued further that the absence of generational boundaries and hierarchical authority relations represent socialization deficits for children in single-parent families, Adolescents in stepfamilies may be disadvantaged in two ways. First, they lived in single-parent families for a period of time following their parents' divorce, and thus they may have been adversely affected by disruptions or reductions in parental interaction, monitoring, and support prior to the formation of the stepfamily, Second, family systems theories posit that stepfamily living arrangements tend to be complex and stressful (Crosbie-Bumett, 1989), especially for stepparents and stepchildren (Mills, 1984). Family boundaries involving half-siblings, step-kin, and quasi-kin (Bohannon, 1970) are ambiguous, and step family members lack institution- alized guidelines and social support for their relationships (Bray, 1988; Cherlin, 1978; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). Research also suggests that children's contact with the nonresidential father decreases over time (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) and that living in a stepfamily further reduces the likelihood that such ties will be maintained (Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988), The literature thus suggests the family composition hypothesis: Adolescents reared in

households in which the two biological parents are not present (divorced families, stepfamilies, and continuously single-parent families) will exhibit more adjustment problems and academic difficulties than adolescents in intact, first-married family units.

Economic deprivation. A second approach emphasizes the pervasive influence of economic deprivation on children's adjustment in single-parent families, National data indicate that nearly half (47%) of children in mother-only families are living below the poverty threshold, compared to 9% of children in two-parent families. Among Black children, three of every five in mother-child families are living in poverty (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). Economic hardship has sweeping and intense consequences for parents and children, including lower levels of parental nurturance, inconsistent discipline, and adolescent distress (Leinpers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989; Voydanoff, 1990), It has been argued elsewhere (e.g., Amato, 1993) that because family income is generally higher in two-parent households than in one-parent households, children in two-parent families should exhibit higher well-being than their counterparts in single-parent families. However, if economic deprivation is the critical variable, its effects should transcend family structure, influencing family (including irtterparental and parent—child) relations and adolescent well-being across family types (Demo, 1993). The economic deprivation perspective thus leads to the following hypotheses: (a) Adolescents in higher income families will experience fewer adjustment problems and academic difficulties than adolescents in lower income families, irrespective of family type; and (b) when family income is controlled, there will be no differences in adolescent well-being across one-parent and two-parent families.

Family conflict. A third perspective underscores the impact of family conflict on children's well-being. Whether children live in households where one or two parents reside, and whether they live with biological parents or stepparents, family processes shape children's behavior and well-being. Many studies demonstrate that the level of family conflict is a better predictor than type of family structure for understanding children's adjustment, self-esteem, and other aspects of psychological well-being (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Raschke & Raschke, 1979). Reviews of the literature suggest that interparental and parent—child conflict mediate the effects of family structure on children's well-being (Demo & Acock, 1988; Emery, 1982; also see Booth & Edwards, 1989 for an empirical illustration). Thus, the family conflict hypothesis predicts that regardless of family structure, adolescents exposed to high levels of interparental conflict and parent—adolescent conflict will experience more adjustment problems and academic difficulties than their counterparts in families with less conflict.

Summary. There are commonalities and differences among these three approaches and their predictions. In general, they suggest that youth in first-married family units should be advantaged in terms of adjustment and well-being and that adolescents who have experienced parental divorce and those in single-parent families are disadvantaged. The family conflict perspective, however, stipulates that family process is more important than family type, whereas the economic deprivation perspective suggests that differences across family types are an artifact of differences in family income. In testing these hypotheses it will be necessary to examine several mediating processes and control variables, such as adolescents' age, race, and gender, as discussed later.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

We analyzed data collected in the NSFH. Data were collected from a national probability sample of 13,017 participants in 1987 and 1988, with the average interview lasting 1 hr and 40 min (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The main sample, 9,643 participants, represented the noninstitutionalized population age 19 and above in the United States, The remaining participants were from oversampled groups (Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, single parents, stepfamilies, cohabiting persons, and persons who recently married). We used a subset of these data because we were focusing on mothers who report on the behavior of their adolescents, ages 12 to 18. We also used strict criteria to define our subsample of mothers and adolescents in different family types. The four family types, as we have identified them, represent the living arrangements of a substantial proportion of mother-present families with children at home (Acock & Demo, 1994). However, there are many family types

that were not examined here (e.g,, currently cohabiting units with children, children living with grandparents) and the reader is alerted to these.

Certain groups were oversampled in the NSFH, including single-parent families and stepfamilies. We used the unweighted data to ensure sufficient cases of divorced families, stepfamilies, and continuously single-parent families. Without the oversampling we would have had too few remarried mothers and too few continuously single mothers to make statistically meaningful comparisons. As an alternative to weighting we included as control variables the principle factors used in the oversampling: family type and race. We also included in regression analyses, as a control, a dummy variable representing whether a family was in the primary sample or over sample.

Variables and Measures

Family Type

Our analyses are based on a subsample of 850 families defined as follows:

1. First marriages (n = 377). These are families in which both the mother and father were in their first marriage and had one or more biological children age 12 to 18 living at home. Steps were taken to maximize sample size while minimizing misclassifications. Using data provided by mothers, we excluded families in which the mother reported being married more than once. The number of times her husband was married was obtained from a self-administered questionnaire the husband completed. We included only those families in which the husband reported this was his first marriage or if his data were missing. Some families with missing reports from the father may have involved his second or subsequent marriage. We were able to eliminate some of this potential bias by excluding families in which the mother had a biological child that was not her husband's child, Finally, we excluded families in which the mother was not living with her husband at the time of the interview. Average length of marriage was 20.3 years, less than 3% of these families had other adult relatives living in the household, and average household size was 4.44 persons,

2. Divorced (n = 282). A second family type consisted of a mother who was divorced and had at least one biological child age 12 to 18 from a previous marriage living at home. We excluded divorced families in which there was a cohabiting partner at the time of the interview. We did this because of the great variation in couple and parenting patterns among cohabiting partners. Some single mothers who are cohabiting may have stable partnerships and parenting arrangements similar to those in stepfamilies. Other cohabiting single mothers may be in short-term relationships in which their partners have very little interaction with or influence on the adolescent. In defining children as being from a previous marriage, we included children born within 10 months after the marriage ended. Divorced mothers had been married an average of 1.4 times, the average length of time since their last divorce was 8.4 years, nearly 5% of these families had another adult relative living in the household, and the average household size was 3.11 persons.

3. Stepfamilies (n = 131). The third group included families in which the mother was married and living with her husband at the time of the inter- view, she had been married more than once, and they had a biological child age 12 to 18 who was not the biological child of the mother's current husband. For the adolescents living in these families then, these are stepfather families. Glick's (1989) analysis of national data indicated that 82% of all stepfamily households are stepfather households. Remarried mothers had been married an average of 2.26 times, the average length of the current marriage was 5,56 years, less than 1% of these families involved other adult relatives living in the household, and the mean household size was 4.21 persons.

4. Continuously single (n = 60). The fourth family type included mothers who had never married and who had one or more biological children age 12 to 18 living at home. As with divorced mothers, we excluded continuously single mothers who had a cohabiting partner at the time of the interview. Five percent of these families had other adult relatives living in the household, and the total household size averaged 3.43 persons. We restricted our attention to families in which mothers were the primary respondents. Focusing on mothers and their perceptions clarified the analysis. For example, in describing the adjustment of an adolescent, we had

the mother's description for all families rather than the mother's for some families and the father's for others. There is consistent evidence that, in comparison to fathers, mothers tend to be more involved in childrearing, more closely attached to their children, and are better sources of information about their children (LaRossa, 1988; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

Dependent Variables

We had three measures of adolescent well-being: Socioemotional Adjustment, Academic Performance, and Global Well-being. A focal child was selected for each family. Where there were two or more children, their names were listed alphabetically and the first name was selected. The measures of adolescent well-being refer to the focal child.

1. Socioemotional Adjustment was measured using a 10-item scale. Six items reflect healthy adolescent adjustment: willingness to try new things, keeping busy, being cheerful, obeying, getting along well with others, and doing responsibilities. Four other items indicate adjustment problems: being depressed, losing one's temper, being fearful, and bullying or being cruel. Response options for all 10 items ranged from 1 for never to 3 for often. Items were coded so a higher score indicated better adjustment. The a = .712 indicates the scale has moderate reliability. Adjustment was computed as the mean of the items answered.

2. Academic Performance was measured by asking mothers what grades their focal child typically received, There were nine response options ranging from mostly A's (coded 9) to mostly F's (coded 1).

3. Global Well-Being was measured by a single item. Mothers were asked: "All things considered, is (focal child's) life going: (1) very well, (2) fairly well, (3) not so well, or (4) not well at all." The responses were reverse coded so that higher scores indicate higher well-being. Although there is no way to assess the reliability of this single item indicator, it does have considerable face validity as a global measure of well-being.

Independent Variables

There are six sets of explanatory variables: (a) mother—adolescent relations, (b) mother—father relations, (c) family resources, (d) mother's characteristics, (e) adolescent's age and gender, and (f) a control variable based on the sampling design. Part of the analysis is done for all groups combined, In doing this, we have included three dummy variables to represent the four family types, Type Two is coded to represent divorced families, Type Three to represent stepfamilies, and Type Four to represent continuously single-parent families, The first-married families serve as the reference group.

1. Mother—Adolescent relations. We have five measures of mother— adolescent relations.

Mother—Adolescent Disagreement. This was measured using a 10-item scale. The items involved how often during the prior 12 months the mother and adolescent had open disagreements regarding a series of issues including dress, girl or boyfriend, friends, sexual behavior, and helping around the house. Each item was coded on a 6-point scale from 1 for never a problem to 6 for almost daily. The scale was moderately reliable with a = .752. The variable was computed as the mean of the items answered.

Supervision of Adolescent, Parental supervision of the adolescent was measured using four items concerning when the adolescent would be allowed to be at home alone. These items included (a) morning before school, (b) in the afternoon after school, (c) all day when there is no school, and (d) at night, if you were gone until midnight. These items are highly reliable, a = .863. This scale taps a limited range of supervision, but this dimension of parenting is commonly viewed as problematic for single parents. The score was computed as the mean of the items answered.

Support. Parental support was measured using two items involving how often the mother: (a) praises the adolescent and (b) hugs the adolescent. Each item was answered on a 4-point scale from never to very often. The correlation between the two items is .343. Although this correlation suggests low reliability, previous

research indicates that verbal and physical expressions of affection for the adolescent are prominent dimensions of parental support (Barber & Thomas, 1986; Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987). The score was computed as the mean of the two items.

Mother—Adolescent Interaction. This was measured using six items that concerned how often the mother shared certain activities with her adolescent child. Four of the items concerned: (a) leisure activities away from home, (b) working on projects or playing together, (c) private talks, and (d) helping with homework. Responses were coded from 1 for never or rarely to 6 for almost every day. Two other items concerned eating (a) breakfast or (b) dinner together. Responses were coded from 0 for none to 7 for every day. Although these items vary in the degree to which they reflect engagement with the adolescent (Lamb, Neck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987), the items form a moderately reliable scale with a = .722. The score was computed as the mean of the items answered.

Mother's Aggression Toward the Adolescent. This was measured using two items: how often the mother reported spanking or slapped the adolescent and how often she reported yelling at the adolescent. The responses for each ranged from never to very often on a 4-point scale. The correlation between the two items is .290, The score was computed as the mean of the two items.

2. Interparental relations. The measurement of mother-father dynamics varied depending on whether the mother was married or not. For married (and remarried) mothers, a five-item scale was used to assess Marital Conflict. The items asked the frequency of conflict concerning tasks, money, time spent together, sex, and children. The responses ranged from (1) never to (6) almost every day, The scale had moderate reliability, a = ,712. The variable was computed as the mean of items answered.

Marital Happiness was measured using a single indicator that asked "Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?" Responses formed a 7-point scale ranging from very unhappy to very happy.

For divorced and continuously single-parent families, mother-father conflict was measured differently. Conflict with Nonresidential Father was measured using a six-item scale asking how much conflict the adolescent's mother and father have over different issues: (a) where the adolescent lives, (b) how the adolescent is raised, (c) money spent on adolescent by the mother, (d) money spent on adolescent by the father, (e) visits with the adolescent by the father, and (f) the father's contribution to the adolescent's financial support. The conflict was reported on a 3-point scale ranging from none to a great deal. The scale was moderately reliable, a = .767. Although a high score on this scale clearly reflects mother-father conflict, a low score may signify low conflict either because the mother and father agree or because the father is uninvolved, The score was computed as the mean of the items answered,

When all family types are analyzed as a combined sample, representing mother-father conflict is problematic. Different items with different response options were asked depending on whether the mother was married or not. Because representing mother-father conflict was considered essential, we constructed a Parental Conflict score. Mother-father conflict was standardized to a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Conflict with nonresidential father was similarly standardized. The Parental Conflict score was defined as the rescaled mother—father conflict score for first- married mothers, as the rescaled mother—nonresidential father score for divorced and continuously single mothers, and as the mean of the two rescaled scores for stepfamilies. Because each of the components of this score are reliable, it is reasonable to assume this score is reliable. Although recognizing the limitation of our approach, all the items in these scales focus on parental conflict, and this variable is necessary for an overall analysis.

3. Family resources. We used two variables computed by the NSFH staff: Income represents the total household income; and Mother's Educa- fion represents the years of education the mother completed,

4. Mother's characteristics. The Race of the mother was coded as (1) for non-Hispanic White and (0) for others. The Hours Employed was computed as the hours the mother worked in the preceding week, or in a typical week if she was temporarily unemployed. Mother's Depression was measured using a 12-item scale. Typical items asked how often during the past week the mother had a series of experiences such as: feeling bothered by things that usually don't bother you, not feeling like eating, having trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing, or feeling sad, lonely, or depressed. Responses ranged from (0) for no days in the past week to (7) for every day. The scale was highly reliable, a = .926. The score was computed as the mean of the items answered.

5. Characteristics of adolescents. Two characteristics of adolescents were included in the analysis. The focal child's Gender and Age were reported by the mother. The sample consists of 48.6% girls and 51.4% boys, whose average age is 14.79.

6. Control variable. Because the analysis uses unweighted data, two adjustments were made, First, we included in our analyses the major variables (i.e., family structure, income, and race) used in determining the weight. Second, we included a variable called Sample. Sample is a dummy variable reflecting whether the family was in the primary sample or in one of the oversampled groups.

Missing Data

Two variables had substantial missing data. Income is an important control variable because of the dramatic differences in income between family types, but 17.5% of the mothers did not report their household income. The variable measuring conflict with the nonresident father was not completed by 10.2% of divorced mothers, 29.8% of stepfamily mothers, and 30.0% of continuously single mothers. Because conflict with the non-resident father is used in computing parental conflict for three types of families, there are a lot of missing data on parental conflict in these types of families. To minimize loss of cases that answered all the other items relevant to this analysis, we substituted the respective family type's mean, where necessary, for missing data on these variables, To assess any problem this causes we created two dummy variables coded as (1) when the mother did not provide information on one of these variables.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis is divided into two sections, First, we compared the independent and dependent variables across the four family types, This is followed by an analysis of explanatory variables that account for adolescent well-being within each family type,

Family Processes and Adolescent Well-being Across Family Types

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for both the outcome variables and the predictor variables, The pairs of means that are significantly different at the .05 level, based on the Bonerferoni multiple comparison procedure, are indicated in the far right column. Although there are a number of statistically significant differences, the most prominent result is that the adolescents and parents in the four family types are remarkably similar in many respects. Because different comparisons are based on very different sample sizes (340-377 for first-married families vs. 56-60 for continuously single-parent families), the sensitivity to sample size of significance tests needs to be recognized, In the discussion that follows we focus on the magnitude of differences between family types rather than on simply which are statistically significant.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Family Types on Outcome and Explanatory Variables: Unadjusted Means

Variable	First Married		Divorced		Stepfamily		Continuously Single		Significant Differences
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Outcomes									
Socioemotional adjustment	2.58	0.27	2.50	0.33	2.47	0.31	2.53	0.32	a,b
Academic performance	7.03	1.48	6.49	1.67	6.74	1.85	6.64	1.51	a
Global well-being	3.59	0.56	3.36	0.68	3.24	0.73	3.53	0.65	a,b,f
Mother–Adolescent									
Disagree	1.62	0.49	1.85	0.68	1.85	0.62	1.75	0.77	a,b
Supervision	1.68	0.63	1.54	0.59	1.58	0.56	1.84	0.72	a,e,f
Support	3.62	0.49	3.61	0.50	3.67	0.43	3.33	0.68	c,e,f
Interaction	4.27	1.11	3.89	1.21	3.93	1.05	4.15	1.21	a,b
Aggression	2.16	0.61	2.18	0.64	2.19	0.58	2.44	0.75	c,e
Parental									
Parental conflict	100.46	15.16	102.23	15.81	97.60	10.17	95.68	8.18	d,e
Marital conflict	1.72	0.70	na	na	1.64	0.67	na	na	ns
Nonresident conflict	na	na	1.26	0.35	1.11	0.19	1.11	0.18	d,e
Marital happiness	5.82	1.36	na	na	5.79	1.59	na	na	ns
Resources									
Income (dollars)	46,338	4,544	20,625	1,911	46,827	3,002	9,844	6,553	a,c,d,f
Education (years)	12.26	3.01	12.66	2.32	12.90	2.07	11.03	2.75	c,e,f
Mother									
Race (% White)	73.67	44.10	69.96	45.92	86.82	33.96	8.33	27.87	b,c,d,e,f
Hours employed	23.59	19.13	32.54	18.24	25.89	18.94	20.08	19.79	a,d,e
Depression	1.18	1.32	1.53	1.52	1.29	1.19	1.92	1.53	a,c,f
Adolescent									
Gender (% male)	52.15	50.02	51.96	50.06	45.38	49.98	57.63	49.84	ns
Age	14.76	1.87	14.94	1.74	14.71	1.80	14.52	1.71	ns

Note. na = not applicable; ns = not significant. The Bonerferoni adjustment for multiple comparisons was used with an alpha level of .05. The letter a signifies first-married families are different from divorced families; b that first-married families are different from those in stepfamilies; c that first-married families are different from continuously single-parent families; d that divorced families differ from stepfamilies; e that divorced families differ from continuously single-parent families; and f that stepfamilies differ from continuously single-parent families. The number of families in the first-married group ranged from 340 to 377; for the divorced the number ranged from 270 to 283; for stepfamilies the number ranged from 122 to 131; and for continuously single parents the number ranged from 56 to 60.

Differences in adolescent outcome variables. Mothers' ratings of adolescent adjustment showed the highest level of well-being among adolescents in first-married families, Youths whose parents are in first marriages were roughly one fourth to one third of a standard deviation higher on socioemotional adjustment than their counterparts in divorced or stepfamilies. Interestingly, adolescents in continuously single-parent families had the second highest level of socioemotional adjustment.

The highest academic performance was reported for adolescents in first-married families. These grades were significantly higher than the grades reported for adolescents of divorced mothers. Overall, the academic performance of adolescents in first-married families was about one third of a standard deviation higher than the other groups. However, the only statistically significant difference was between the academic performance of adolescents in first-married and divorced families. The school grades of adolescents in divorced families, stepfamilies, and continuously single-parent families were not significantly different.

The indicator of global well-being showed the first-married mothers reporting their adolescents having the highest well-being, The next highest level was reported for adolescents living in continuously single-mother families, followed by those in divorced and stepfamilies. The greatest difference, approximately half a standard deviation, occurred between adolescents in first-married families and stepfamilies, Although this is a substantial difference in their distributions, it is important to note that these averages fall between a score of 3, indicating the adolescent's life is going "fairly well," and 4, indicating it is going "very well."

Differences in mother-adolescent relations. Table 1 shows that divorced and step family mothers reported the highest level of disagreement and the lowest levels of supervision of, and interaction with, their adolescent

children, Continuously single mothers reported levels of disagreement and interaction with, and supervision of, their adolescents that were similar to first-married mothers, However, continuously single mothers are note-worthy in two respects: They are significantly less likely to praise or hug their adolescents, and they are most likely to be aggressive toward their adolescents.

Differences in interparental relations and family resources. As explained previously, comparisons of interparental relations across different family and parental configurations are problematic from a measurement standpoint. With this in mind, we direct attention to comparisons of groups sharing the same measures: the marital conflict measure for comparing first-married families arId stepfamilies; and the conflict with nonresidential father measure for comparing divorced families, stepfamilies, and continuously single-parent families. There is no significant difference in marital conflict between first-married parents and stepfamily parents. However, compared to mothers in stepfamilies and continuously single-parent families, divorced mothers reported greater conflict with nonresidential fathers. This may reflect a lower level of involvement by the nonresidential fathers in stepfamilies and continuously single-parent families (Acock & Demo, 1994). On average, mothers in stepfamilies reported being just as happy with their marriage as first-married mothers. There are dramatic differences in resources across the four family types. Both first-married families and stepfamilies with adolescents had much higher income than single-parent families. Equally important, there is a clear division among single parents depending on whether they had ever been married: Divorced families had over twice the income of continuously single-parent families. There were no significant differences in the educational levels of first-married, divorced, or step family mothers, However, continuously single mothers were significantly less educated than any of the other groups, averaging less than a high school degree.

Differences in characteristics of mothers and adolescents. There were dramatic race differences in family structure, Nearly 87% of stepfamily mothers were White, whereas only 8% of continuously single mothers were White. Employment also varied by marital status. Divorced mothers and, to a lesser degree, stepfamily mothers were employed many more hours per week than first-married mothers. An important difference in employ-ment exists between single mothers who were divorced and those who were continuously single: Divorced mothers were employed the most hours per week of mothers in the four family types, and continuously single mothers were employed the least hours per week.

Significant differences also exist in mothers' well-being, Married mothers—whether in their first or subsequent marriage—were much less likely to be depressed than single mothers. Continuously single mothers reported the highest level of depression, but divorced mothers also were significantly more depressed than those who were married. There were no significant differences in the gender or age distribution of adolescents across the family types.

Correlates of Adolescent Well-being

Correlations between the explanatory variables and outcome variables for the full sample appear in Table 2, Being in a divorced family, compared to

TABLE 2
Correlations of Predictor Variables With Each Adolescent Outcome Variable, Combined Sample

Predictor	Outcome Variable: Adjustment	Outcome Variable: Academic Performance	Outcome Variable: Well-Being
Family Type			
Divorced	−.081*	−.126***	−.103**
Stepfamily	−.086*	−.011	−.140***
Continuously single	−.006	−.023	.032
Mother–Adolescent			
Disagree	−.553***	−.337***	−.408***
Supervision	−.050	.100**	.083*
Support	.194***	.147***	.141***
Interaction	.176***	.111**	.094**
Aggression	−.281***	−.168***	−.124***
Parental			
Parental conflict	−.133***	−.018	−.089*
Missing conflict (dummy)	−.047	−.041	−.060
Resources			
Income	.078*	.092**	.032
Missing income (dummy)	−.013	−.055	.052
Education	.052	.166***	−.009
Mother			
Race (1 = White)	−.074*	−.003	−.117***
Hours employed	.004	−.026	.010
Depression	−.190***	−.087*	−.180***
Adolescent			
Gender (1 = male)	−.023	−.192***	−.114***
Age	.018	−.162***	−.085*
Sample (1 = main, 2 = over)	−.049	−.057	−.038

Note. The sample size for predicting socioemotional adjustment ranges from 804 to 842, for predicting academic performance it ranges from 776 to 813, and for predicting global well-being it ranges from 809 to 847.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

a first-married family, is correlated with lower adolescent adjustment, academic performance, and global well-being. Adolescents in stepfamilies also had lower adjustment and global well-being than their counterparts in first-married families. The correlations presented in Table 2 show that the strongest and most consistent predictors of adolescent well-being are those variables measuring aspects of mother—adolescent relations. The variable most closely related to adolescent outcomes is mother—adolescent disagreement, with correlations ranging from —.337 to —.553 (p < ,001), Support and interaction are associated with higher levels of adolescent well-being, whereas aggression toward the adolescent is related to lower well-being.

Interparental relations are also important, although the magnitude of these associations is weaker than for mother-adolescent relations. Parental conflict is associated with worse adjustment (r = -.133, p < .001) and slightly lower global well-being (r = -.089, p < .05) of adolescents. Among family resource variables, mothers' education and family income are correlated positively with adolescent academic performance, and income is weakly correlated with adolescents' socioemotional adjustment, Mothers who are non-White reported their adolescents have lower global well-being and slightly worse adjustment. Mothers' hours of employment per week is uncorrelated with any of the outcome variables. Mothers who are them- selves depressed reported their adolescents have poorer adjustment, academic performance, and well-being.

The gender of the adolescent is important, with boys performing significantly worse academically (r = -.192, p < ,001) and having substantially lower global well-being (r = -.114, p < .001), Similarly, as the adolescents got older, academic performance declined markedly (r = -.162, p < .001) and global well-being (r = -.085, p < .05) diminished slightly. The variable controlling for whether the adolescent is in the primary sample or the oversample is not significantly correlated with any of the outcomes.

Because many of the explanatory variables (e.g., income and education) are correlated with one another, the bivariate correlations in Table 2 do not represent the independent effect of each explanatory variable. To identify the independent effects of each of the explanatory variables, we conducted a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regressions. It is noted that each of the outcome variables departed from normality at the $p < .05$ level and each was negatively skewed, with positive outcomes being most frequently reported. Although this lack of normality violates an OLS assumption, this limitation is mitigated by the large sample size used in the analysis. A potential problem using regression analysis is that the skewed distributions of the outcome variables result in restricted ranges, Because of this limited variance on the outcome variables, the measures of explained variation, R2, will be attenuated (Acock, 1989). Each outcome variable was regressed on all explanatory variables.[1] Following this, a reduced model was estimated in which the insignificant ($p > .05$) explanatory variables were deleted. The results appear in Table 3.

Regressions Predicting Adolescent Well-being

A prominent pattern evident in the regressions predicting adolescent well-being was the strong relation between mother-adolescent relations and adolescent socioemotional adjustment, Every measure of mother-adolescent relations—disagreement, supervision, emotional support, and frequency of interaction—was significantly related to adolescent adjustment, Frequent disagreements and maternal aggression were associated with lower adjustment, whereas maternal support and more regular interaction were related to higher adjustment. Interestingly, the more the mother supervised the adolescent, the worse the adjustment. As with many of the relations we examined here, it is possible that for supervision the relation may be reversed. That is, it may be that mothers with maladjusted adolescents expend more effort supervising and controlling them. Of the many other influences on adolescent adjustment—including variables representing family type, parental conflict, family resources, and characteristics of mothers and adolescents—the only other variable to exert a significant influence is mothers' education, Still, largely on the strength of variables representing mother-adolescent relations, the reduced model explains 37.3% of the variance in adjustment. In the full model, there was no statistically reliable difference in adolescent adjustment by family type, and being White was associated with worse adjustment. For the most part, however, the results were very similar for the full and reduced models predicting each adolescent outcome.[2]

Adolescents' academic performance was related to a diverse set of variables, Mother-adolescent disagreement and mothers' aggression to- ward the adolescent were associated with lower academic performance. Similarly, being from a divorced family, being male, and being an older adolescent were related to lower grades in school. Mothers' education was significantly and positively related to adolescents' academic performance, but income did not have an independent effect.

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[1] To avoid capitalizing on chance or problems associated with multicollinearity, we did not include in the regressions descriptive variables such as number of times married, length of marriage, time since divorce, presence of other adult relatives in the household, or household size. We restricted our attention to variables identified in previous theory and research as important predictors of adolescent well-being,

[2] We presented both models—full and reduced—so that readers may examine the complete set of predictor variables and the magnitude of their effects If we were to present only the reduced model (as we do in Table 5), readers may not understand that if just one particular predictor variable (or subset of predictor variables) were added to the reduced equation, that variable (or some subset of variables) may be significant. The key point is that when the full model was estimated, only the variables in the reduced model exerted significant effects.

TABLE 3
Multiple Regression Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) for Each Outcome Variable: All Family Types Combined

	Adjustment				*Academic Performance*				*Global Well-Being*			
	Full Model		*Reduced Model*		*Full Model*		*Reduced Model*		*Full Model*		*Reduced Model*	
Variable	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Intercept	2.917**	na	2.735**	na	9.168**	na	9.976**	na	4.455**	na	4.251**	na
Family Type												
Divorced	−0.025	−.039			−.400**	−.117	−.301*	−.088	−.164**	−.119	−.161***	−.116
Stepfamily	−0.049	−.058			−.243	−.054			−.297***	−.164	−.271***	−.150
Continuously single	−0.008	−.007			−.131	−.021			−.029	−.011		
Mother–Adolescent												
Disagree	−.232***	−.466	−.246***	−.492	−.765***	−.285	−.822***	−.308	−.346***	−.322	−.354***	−.332
Supervision	−.064***	−.129	−.056**	−.114	−.021	−.008			−.017	−.016		
Support	.069***	−.115	.065**	.108	−.195	.060			.143**	.109	.139***	.107
Interaction	.037***	.141	.035***	.134	.031	.022			.005	.008		
Aggression	−.064***	−.132	−.067***	−.138	−.271**	−.105	−.247**	−.096	−.003	−.002		
Parental												
Parental conflict	−.001	−.037			−.000	−.003			−.002	−.046		
Missing conflict dummy	−.032	−.025			.109	.016			−.083	−.030		
Resources												
Income	.000	.052			.001	.015			.000	.007		
Missing income dummy	−.034	−.043			−.305*	−.071	−.278*	−.065	.040	.023		
Education	.008*	.066	.011**	.096	.117***	.181	.112***	.177	.002	.007		
Mother												
Race (1 = white)	−.093***	−.141	−.081***	−.121	−.198	−.056			−.177**	−.124	−.170**	−.119
Hours employed	.001	.034			.000	.005			.003*	.078	.003*	.075
Depression	−.012	−.054			−.005	−.004			−.052**	−.109	−.053***	−.114
Adolescent												
Gender (1 = male)	−.007	−.011			−.569***	−.175	−.562***	−.174	−.141**	−.107	−.136**	−.104
Age	−.005	−.032			−.145***	−.158	−.150***	−.165	−.031*	−.083	−.027*	−.073
Sample (1 = main, 2 = over)	.003	.004			.053	.015			.027	.019		
R–square	.392		.373		.229		.225		.244		.239	
Sample *n*	760		797		736		763		762		791	

Note. na = not applicable.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

In regressions predicting adolescents' global well-being, family type exerted a significant influence. Compared to adolescents from first-married families, those from divorced families and stepfamilies had lower global well-being. Mother-adolescent relations were also important, with disagreement related to lower well-being and more supportive relations associated with increased well-being, Mothers' hours of paid employment was weakly, but positively, related to adolescent well-being. Non-White adolescents were reported to have lower global well-being than their White counterparts, boys were reported to have lower well-being than girls, and older adolescents were judged to have lower well-being than younger adolescents.

Predicting Adolescent Well-Being Within Family Types

There may be very different processes influencing the well-being of adolescents in different family structures. For example, single-parent families and stepfamilies include relations with nonresident fathers. As another example, it is possible that mothers' employment will be more problematic or more advantageous for adolescents in some family types than in others. To evaluate differences in the factors that influence adolescent well-being across family types, we estimated bivariate correlations between each explanatory variable and each outcome variable (Table 4). Then we conducted a separate regression for each family type (Table 5), because there were so few continuously single-parent families, they are excluded from the multiple regressions reported in Table 5. For this reason we describe briefly the pattern of correlations for the continuously single-parent families.

In continuously single-parent families, disagreement between mothers and adolescents was strongly and inversely related to adolescent socioemotional adjustment and global well-being. Conversely, mothers' support of adolescents, mothers' hours of employment, and family income were significantly and positively related to adolescent adjustment. Mothers' depression was inversely related to adolescents' global well-being, whereas higher levels of maternal education were associated with better academic performance and higher global well-being among adolescents. Higher levels of family income were also related to adolescents achieving higher grades in school. It is also noteworthy that because the correlations for continuously single-parent families were based on 53-60 cases, there were some moderate correlations that were not statistically significant,
For first-married families, divorced families, and stepfamilies, there were sufficient cases for multiple regression. The first step was a multiple regression of all explanatory variables on each adolescent outcome within

TABLE 4
Correlations of Explanatory Variables with Each Adolescent Outcome Variable: By Family Type

	First Married			*Divorced*			*Stepfamilies*			*Continuously Single*		
	Adjustment	*Academic Performance*	*Well-Being*	*Adjustment*	*Academic Performance*	*Well-Being*	*Adjustment*	*Academic Performance*	*Well-Being*	*Adjustment*	*Academic Performance*	*Well-Being*
escent												
	−.508***	−.272***	−.249***	−.568***	−.377***	−.470***	−.587***	−.375***	−.455***	−.477***	−.206	−.387**
	−.022	.106*	.164**	−.114*	.139*	.021	−.150	−.010	−.079	.061	.003	.037
	.125*	.165**	.126*	.208***	.104	.147*	.292***	.118	.202*	.321*	.239	.221
	.136*	.167**	.065	.266***	.026	.123*	.082	.102	−.022	−.140	.013	−.025
	−.343***	−.186***	−.116*	−.250***	−.148*	−.142*	−.296***	−.126	−.114	−.150	−.251	−.154
lict	−.139**	−.046	−.013	na	na	na	−.178*	.064	−.152	na	na	na
piness	.204***	.042	.099	na	na	na	.112	−.012	.241**	na	na	na
t father conflict	na	na	na	−.132*	.024	−.176**	−.000	−.031	.080	−.180	−.183	.079
resident dummy	na	na	na	−.018	.001	−.089	.130	.022	.102	−.161	−.008	−.023
	.036	.062	.004	.091	.077	.033	.084	−.016	−.027	.274*	.253*	.222
me dummy	.058	−.112*	.096	−.135*	−.064	.010	−.022	.051	−.094	−.012	−.108	.155
	.086	.209***	.042	.034	.108	−.080	.072	.186*	.006	.093	.336**	.265*
ite)	−.073	.002	−.088	−.111	−.102	−.196**	−.019	.066	.034	−.027	.243	.031
oyed	−.040	−.032	.025	.066	.084	.028	−.013	−.096	.037	.274*	.079	.220
	−.143**	−.132*	.074	−.206***	−.029	−.214***	−.168*	−.066	−.252**	−.249	.030	−.289*
male)	−.016	−.212***	−.043	−.024	−.217***	−.183**	−.117	−.189*	−.255**	.077	.004	.030
	.033	−.185***	−.125*	.098	−.120*	.009	−.058	−.155	−.150	−.246	−.231	−.130
main, 2 = over)	.067	−.037	.069	−.010	.034	.024	−.031	−.047	.081	−.043	.038	−.122

ot applicable. The sample size for first married families for predicting adjustment ranged from 344 to 372, for predicting academic performance it ranged from 337 to 363, and for predicting global anged from 354 to 374. The sample size for divorced families for predicting adjustment ranged from 272 to 279, for predicting academic performance it ranged from 262 to 270, and for predicting ing it ranged from 275 to 283. The sample size for stepfamilies for predicting adjustment ranged from 124 to 131, for predicting academic performance it ranged from 118 to 125, and for predicting ing it ranged from 124 to 131. The sample size for continuously single-parent families for predicting adjustment ranged from 56 to 60, for predicting academic performance it ranged from 53 to 56, ting global well-being it ranged from 56 to 60.
< .01. ***p > .001.

TABLE 5
Multiple Regression Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) for Each Outcome Variable: By Family Type

	First Married						*Divorced*						*Stepfamilies*					
	Adjustment		*Academic*		*Well-Being*		*Adjustment*		*Academic*		*Well-Being*		*Adjustment*		*Academic*		*Well-Being*	
Variable	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Intercept	2.641***	na	9.107***	na	2.964***	na	3.032***	na	10.303***	na	4.853***	na	3.392***	na	10.475**	na	3.136***	na
Mother–Adolescent																		
Disagree	−.253***	−.469	−.691***	−.230	−.225***	−.196	−.259***	−.522	−.898***	−.362	−.404***	−.402	−.247***	−.495	−1.050***	−.349	−.467***	−.397
Supervision					.179***	.202	−.101***	−.180					−.127**	−.227	−.522	−.154		
Support			.317*	.103	.170**	.147							.153**	.211			.324*	.184
Interaction	.032**	.134					.078***	.282							.157	.087		
Aggression	−.094***	−.217	−.324*	−.134			−.072**	−.135					−.104*	−.195	−.039	−.012		
Parental																		
Marital conflict	.049*	.125															.094*	.202
Marital happiness	.028**	.147									−.205*	−.107						
Nonresident father conflict																		
Resources													.001	.111				
Income											−.009	−.032	−.010	−.067	.140	.159		
Education	.014***	.158	.109***	.209														
Mother																		
Race (1 = white)							−.071*	−.099	−.322	−.091	−.265***	−.178	−.099	−.111				
Hours employed					.004*	.118			.012*	.132			.001	.029			.007*	.174
Depression			−.118*	−.098							−.069**	−.152					−.083	−.130
Adolescent																		
Gender (1 = male)			−.567***	−.191					−.527**	−.162	−.161*	−.117	−.103*	−.165	−.697*	−.184	−.312**	−.208
Age			−.160***	−.201					−.138**	−.143			−.027	−.158	−.206	−.194	−.048	−.115
R-square	0.351***		0.247***		0.116***		0.438***		.204***		.301***		.483***		.247***		.378***	
Sample *n*	319		333		312		270		266		276		121		117		120	

Note. na = not applicable.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

each family type. Because sample sizes varied across family types, and significance levels are partly a function of sample size, we used the magnitude of the effects rather than their statistical significance to determine variables to be included in a second multiple regression analysis, In the second regression, we included only those variables that had Ps of .10 or larger. These reduced models are reported in Table 5.

Socioemotional adjustment. The reduced models explained much of the variance in adolescent socioemotional adjustment (35.1% of the variance in first-married families, 43.8% in divorced families, and 48.3% in stepfamilies), Aspects of mother-adolescent relations were the most consistent and powerful influences on adolescent adjustment for all family types. Mother-adolescent disagreement and aggression were inversely related to adolescent adjustment, whereas higher levels of interaction were associated with more favorable adjustment. Interparental relations were significant in first-married families, with both marital happiness and marital conflict related to adolescent adjustment. The relation of marital conflict with adolescent adjustment ran counter to one of our hypotheses, and with a significant zero-order correlation between these variables, we suspected that the regression finding could be an anomaly stemming from estimating many coefficients in one equation. Because there is considerable colinearity between marital conflict, mother-adolescent disagreement, and mothers' aggression toward adolescents, we estimated a separate equation (not shown) that included marital conflict but did not include the two mother-adolescent variables (disagreement and aggression). In this regression, marital conflict had a significant negative effect on adolescent socioemotional adjustment.

The only significant effect involving a family resource variable was that mothers' education was associated with better adolescent adjustment in first-married families. None of the characteristics of mothers (race, employment, depression) had a significant independent effect on adjustment in first-married families, but in divorced families White mothers reported their adolescents to have worse adjustment. The gender and age of the adolescent did not affect adjustment in first-married or divorced families, but boys in stepfamilies were judged to have significantly worse adjustment.

Academic performance. The set of predictor variables we examined explained between one fifth and one fourth of the variance in adolescents' academic performance, Again, we found that measures of mother-adolescent relations were strong predictors of adolescents' outcomes, In first-married families, disagreement with and aggression toward the adolescent were negatively related to academic performance, whereas higher levels of support were related to improved academic performance, Disagreement with mothers was also associated with lower grades in school for adolescents in divorced families and stepfamilies.

Measures of interparental relations did not have any significant effects on adolescents' academic performance in any family type. Of the resource variables, income had no significant effects on academic performance, but mothers' education had a significant effect in first-married families. Mothers' depression was inversely related to adolescents' academic performance in first-married families. In divorced families, mothers who worked more hours in paid employment reported significantly better academic performance for their adolescents. Male adolescents and older adolescents fared worse academically, regardless of family type.

Global well-being. As we have seen for other outcomes, measures of mother-adolescent relations were the strongest predictors of adolescents' global well-being, In first-married families, high levels of disagreement were associated with lower well-being whereas supervision and support were related to more favorable adjustment, Disagreement and support exerted similar effects in stepfamilies, whereas in divorced families, disagreement was the only mother-adolescent variable reaching statistical significance.

Interparental conflict had no significant effect on global well-being for youths in first-married families, but conflict between mothers and nonresidential fathers was significantly related to lower global well-being of adolescents in divorced families. Marital happiness was associated with higher adolescent well-being in stepfamilies even though it did not have a corresponding effect in first-married families.

The analyses also substantiate the importance for adolescents of their mothers' life conditions. In first-married and remarried families, adolescent well-being was related to mothers being employed higher numbers of hours per week. Mothers' depression, on the other hand, was inversely related to adolescent well-being in divorced families and stepfamilies, Non-White mothers judged their adolescents to be better adjusted. In divorced families and stepfamilies, boys had lower well-being than girls, and in the latter family type, age was negatively related to adolescent well-being.

DISCUSSION

This study extends prior research by examining adolescent adjustment across diverse family structures and by using a large, nationally representative sample. Many studies are limited by samples that are too small, rely on clinical populations, or focus on one family structure (typically two-parent families), precluding comparisons with other types of families, Other studies involve two family structures (typically comparing children or adolescents in single-parent and two-parent families), blurring important distinctions within single-parent and two-parent families. Although most large national surveys do not include sufficient information on family processes (Dawson, 1991), the NSFH provides extensive data on family dynamics, allowing us to compare the independent effects of different family processes and to compare their effects with the effects of family resources and family structure.

Analysis of adolescent well-being by family type shows a consistent pattern. Adolescents whose mothers and fathers are both in their first marriage have the fewest problems with socioemotional adjustment, academic performance, and global well-being, Adolescents whose mothers are divorced or remarried experience more problems than their counterparts in first-married families, although these differences in many cases are not large, averaging one fourth to one half of a standard deviation, Adolescents whose mothers have never married are generally at an intermediate level, perhaps benefitting from their intact, nondisrupted family history.

This study was guided by three general conceptual approaches relating family structure to adolescent well-being. Although some support has been provided for each of these approaches, the evidence seems to provide the strongest support for the family conflict hypothesis and the least support for the economic deprivation hypothesis. In support of the family composition hypothesis, adolescents in intact, first-married family units experience the fewest adjustment problems and academic difficulties. But it is important to recognize that, even without controls for relevant variables, differences in adolescent well-being by family type were uniformly small in magnitude, suggesting that family structure is not as important as more proximate influences such as mother-adolescent interaction and mothers' well-being, It is important to note that for each of three measures of adolescent well-being, there is the possibility that 6 statistically significant differences would be obtained by comparing across the family types, meaning that 18 statistically significant differences could be obtained. Yet, without adjusting for relevant variables, we found that one measure (socioemotional adjustment) produced 2 significant differences, a second measure (academic performance) generated 1 significant difference, and a third measure (global well-being) yielded 3 significant differences. Thus, 12 out of 18 comparisons across family types showed differences that failed to achieve statistical significance, In other words, the differences in adolescent well-being within family types are greater than the differences across family types, suggesting that family processes are more important than family composition. Further evidence of the importance of proximate family processes is that in analyses both across and within family types, and for all three dimensions of adolescent well-being, measures of family relations explained the largest proportion of the variance.

Still, many adolescents in divorced families and stepfamilies are vulnerable, Across the family types we studied, adolescents in divorced families and stepfamilies experienced the highest levels of mother-adolescent disagreement, the lowest levels of mother-adolescent interaction and maternal supervision, and the lowest levels of socioemotional and global well-being. Adolescents in divorced families had the lowest grade point averages. Consistent with findings obtained in other studies, the differences tend to be small. Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis found that across 92 studies the average disad- vantage experienced by children living in divorced, single-parent families was .14 of a standard deviation. Family disruption and reorganization also appear to have more damaging consequences for boys than for girls (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Hetherington,

Cox, & Cox, 1982), Although our analyses show no significant difference in the global well-being of male and female adolescents from first-married families, boys from divorced families and stepfamilies have lower global well-being.

What accounts for the lower well-being of adolescents who have experienced parental divorce? Our findings provide strong support for the family conflict hypothesis, Multiple forms of family conflict—including frequent disagreements with parents, parental aggression, marital conflict, and conflict between mothers and nonresidential fathers—consistently and adversely affect adolescent outcomes, For many adolescents in divorced families and stepfamilies, conflict has been a routine part of their lives; for some, it has been ubiquitous. Many adolescents suffer lingering effects from sustained predivorce marital discord (Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990) and accompanying family processes, including inconsistent parenting (Emery, 1982), interspousal aggression and parent-child aggression (Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987), and deteriorations in parent-child relationships (O'Leary & Emery, 1984). These problems are then compounded by persist- ing postdivorce tensions and hostilities between parents, as adolescents are drawn into conflicts, feel caught between parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991), and are either pressured to take sides or try to remain close with both parents arid experience loyalty conflicts (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). In short, our data corroborate mounting evidence that family conflict—manifested in diverse ways and persisting over stages of the life course—impairs adolescent well-being,

A third explanation for differences in adolescent adjustment focuses on economic deprivation. This perspective suggests that adolescents in higher income families should benefit psychologically and academically, irrespective of family type, and that when family income is controlled, there should be no differences in adolescent well-being across one-parent and two-parent families. As expected, we observed dramatic socioeconomic differences by family types, with families headed by continuously single mothers singularly disadvantaged. The importance of distinguishing between single-parent households in which the mother is divorced and in which she has never married is evident. Continuously single mothers are disproportionately Black, tend not to have high school degrees, are employed one third fewer hours per week, and have less than half the household income of divorced families. By contrast, first-married families and stepfamilies fare very well in terms of socioeconomic resources available to invest in their children. Consistent with the economic deprivation perspective, adolescents in two-parent first-married families had the fewest behavior problems and academic difficulties. But contrary to this perspective, adolescents in similarly advantaged two-parent stepfamilies had lower levels of global well-being than adolescents in socioeconomically deprived one-parent families. Although it bears repeating that these differences were small in magnitude, the differences for adolescents in stepfamilies were in the opposite direction to the economic deprivation hypothesis. Further evidence refuting this perspective is that in regressions within family types, total household income was not significantly associated with our measures of adolescent well-being, Two related structural variables, mothers' education and employment, were associated with higher adolescent well-being, but these effects occurred independently of income. The deleterious effects of financial hardship should not be dismissed, however, Consistent with other studies (Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, & Conger, 1994), we found that family income and adolescent adjustment were correlated at the zero-order level, but that this relation was not significant after controlling for variables measuring aspects of mother—adolescent and interparental relations, These findings suggest that the effects of financial strain on adolescent adjustment are indirect, operating through their influence on parenting behavior, including such practices as harsh and inconsistent discipline (Elder & Caspi, 1988; Simons, Lorenz, Conger, & Wu, 1992).

Across family types, the strongest and most consistent predictor of adolescent well-being is mother-adolescent disagreement. The mother's support has generally positive effects, as does her level of interaction with the adolescent. Thus, our data suggest that family process is very influential in shaping adolescent well-being, particularly those processes most proximate to the adolescent. The family process variables we examined that directly involve the mother—adolescent dyad (mother-adolescent disagreement, interaction, supervision, support, and aggression) have the greatest impact on adolescent behavior and academic performance. These are also variables over which the mother and adolescent have some level of control, By contrast, family process

variables that less directly involve the adolescent (marital conflict, marital happiness, conflict between mothers and nonresidential fathers) have weaker, albeit still significant, effects on the behavior of the adolescent.

In interpreting these findings, we need to recognize two caveats, both of which caution against adopting too narrow a view of adolescent socialization, First, although we have shown that mother-adolescent relations are strongly linked to adolescent well-being, we need to stress that we did not include father-adolescent relations in this analysis. Our findings should not be interpreted to suggest that fathers are unimportant or less important than mothers. However, in a recent study assessing the relative influence of mothers' parenting practices, involvement of nonresidential fathers, and interparental conflict, Simons et al. (1994) found that the most consistent and powerful predictor of adolescent adjustment in mother-headed fami- lies was mothers' parenting behavior. Further research is necessary to replicate these findings and to clarify the role of mother-child, father-child, and interparental relations for adolescents living in diverse one- and two-parent family structures. Benefits of involvement with extended kin are also important and understudied, and particularly for Black youth, these relationships and the support they provide may explain why adolescents in continuously single-parent families fare better than generally expected. Second, the statistical associations we have observed are also attributable to the highly interdependent and reciprocal nature of family relationships. Adolescent behavior and well-being influence both mothers' and fathers' behavior and well-being, and adolescent behavior problems contribute to parent-adolescent conflict and aggression.

There are limitations in relying on mothers' perceptions of family life and adolescent well-being, Mothers' perceptions are likely to be influenced by many variables, including the tension or tranquility of mother-adolescent relations, the adolescent's well-being, the mother's involvement in and knowledge of the adolescent's life, and the mother's frame of reference. Mothers are forming judgments about their relationships with their adolescents and about their adolescent's adjustment by comparison to other mothers and adolescents they see in their day-to-day lives. It is possible that differences we report may reflect differences in these referent others. For instance, continuously single mothers, because they are often poor, are exposed to other families that have problems associated with poverty, including poor education, poor housing, and a high crime rate. Thus, they may be comparing their children to other socioeconomically disadvantaged children of single mothers. In contrast, mothers in stepfamilies have much higher average income and may be using different referent others in judging their children's outcomes. We believe the mothers' perceptions are important information, but the limitations in using them to make comparisons across family types need to be recognized. Another limitation of the first wave of NSFH data is that accounts of adolescent well-being are restricted to parents' perceptions. Lacking adolescent reports, we must recognize the possibility that response set may have biased the findings reported here, Future research would benefit from use of multiple informants, enabling comparisons of parental, peer, and self-reports of adolescent behavior, We must also note a broader limitation characterizing the literature on family structure and child adjustment, Although parents' marital status is often assumed to play a causal role in children's and adolescents' lives, there is mounting evidence that individuals with different personal characteristics self-select into particular marital statuses. For example, emotionally unstable individuals may be more likely to enter into unstable partnerships, marriages, and parenting careers (Larson & Holman, 1994). Viewed in this manner, parents' life trajectories and personal characteristics may be more influential than their marital status in shaping adolescent development and well-being (Cherlin et at, 1991), Although the limitations of our data prevent us from exploring these influences, the significant relations we observed between mothers' well-being, family relations, and adolescent well-being are consistent with this interpretation.

Many theories of adolescent development emphasize extrafamilial influences, especially peer group affiliation and friendship relations, and sug- gest a reduced role for families as adolescents seek independence and distance themselves from parents (Bell, 1981; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Adolescence may very well be a life stage punctuated by parent-adolescent disagreement (Collins, 1990; Montemayor, 1986) and by increasing peer and extrafamilial involvement, but our findings underscore the pivotal role that relationships with parents play in shaping the socioemotional, academic, and global well-being of adolescents. As important

as other contexts are for adolescent development, these results reaffirm the pervasive influence of family relations,

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